

Latin American Policy

Henry Clay



OVERVIEW

In the early 1800s, new revolutionary republican governments had taken over in Latin America. Fearing war with Spain, President James Monroe was opposed to recognizing the new governments. The statesman Henry Clay took the opposite stand and, in a speech to Congress (in which he speaks of himself in the third person) in March 1818, he explained why.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- What policy did Clay propose?
 - According to Clay, what were the main concerns Congress faced by recognizing the new governments in Latin America?
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MR. C.[LAY] SAID HE WAS NO propagandist. He would not seek to force upon other nations our principles and our liberty if they did not want them. He would not disturb the repose even of a detestable despotism. But if an abused and oppressed people willed their freedom; if they sought to establish it; if, in truth, they had established it, we had a right as a sovereign power, to notice the fact, and to act as circumstances and our interest required. He would say, in the language of the venerated Father of His Country: "Born in a land of liberty, my anxious recollections, my sympathetic feelings, and my best wishes are irresistibly excited, whensoever, in any country, I see an oppressed nation unfurl the banners of freedom." For his own part, Mr. C. said, that whenever he thought of Spanish America the image irresistibly forced itself upon his mind of an elder brother whose education had been neglected, whose person had been abused and maltreated, and who had been disinherited by the unkindness of an unnatural parent. And when he contemplated the glorious struggle which that country was now making, he thought he beheld that brother rising, by the power and energy of his fine native genius, to the manly rank which nature and nature's God intended for him.

If Spanish America were entitled to success from the justness of her cause, we had no less reason to wish that success from the horrible character which the royal arms have given to the war. More atrocities than those which had been perpetrated during its existence were not to be found even in the annals of Spain herself. . . .

In the establishment of the independence of Spanish America, the United States have the deepest interest. He had no hesitation in asserting his firm

belief that there was no question, in the foreign policy of this country, which had ever arisen, or which he could conceive as ever occurring, in the decision of which we had so much at stake. This interest concerned our politics, our commerce, our navigation. There could not be a doubt that Spanish America, once independent, whatever might be the form of the governments established in its several parts, those governments would be animated by an American feeling and guided by an American policy. They would obey the laws of the system of the New World, of which they would compose a part, in contradistinction to that of Europe. Without the influence of that vortex in Europe, the balance of power between its several parts, the preservation of which had so often drenched Europe in blood, America is sufficiently remote to contemplate the new wars which are to afflict that quarter of the globe as a calm, if not a cold and indifferent, spectator. In relation to those wars, the several parts of America will generally stand neutral. And as, during the period when they rage, it would be important that a liberal system of neutrality should be adopted and observed, all America will be interested in maintaining and enforcing such a system.

The independence, then, of Spanish America is an interest of primary consideration. Next to that, and highly important in itself, was the consideration of the nature of their governments. That was a question, however, for themselves. They would, no doubt, adopt those kinds of governments which were best suited to their condition, best calculated for their happiness. Anxious as he was that they should be free governments, we had no right to prescribe for them. They were, and ought to be, the sole judges for themselves. He was strongly inclined to believe that they would in most, if not all, parts of their country, establish free governments. We were their great example. Of us they constantly spoke as of brothers, having a similar origin. They adopted our principles, copied our institutions, and, in some instances, employed the very language and sentiments of our revolutionary papers. . . .

Mr. C. continued, having shown that the cause of the patriots was just, and that we had a great interest in its successful issue, he would next inquire what course of policy it became us to adopt. He had already declared that to be one of strict and impartial neutrality. It was not necessary for their interest, it was not expedient for our own that we should take part in the war. All they demanded of us was a just neutrality. It was compatible with this pacific policy—it was required by it—that we should recognize any established government if there were any established government in Spanish America. Recognition alone, without aid, was no just cause of war. With aid it was, not because of the recognition but because of the aid, as aid without recognition was cause of war. The truth of these propositions he would maintain upon principle, by the practice of other states, and by the usage of our own. There was no common tribunal among the nations to pronounce upon the fact of the sovereignty of a new state. Each power must and does judge for itself. It was an attribute of sovereignty so to judge. A nation, in exerting this

incontestable right—in pronouncing upon the independence, in fact, of a new state—takes no part in the war. It gives neither men, nor ships, nor money. It merely pronounces that in so far as it may be necessary to institute any relations or to support any intercourse with the new power, that power is capable of maintaining those relations and authorizing that intercourse.